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Patriotic loyalty and interest representation among the Russian Islamic elite

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ABSTRACT

Two trends increasingly guiding the governance of Islam in Russia are political authoritarianisation and the global securitisation of Islam. Given that suspicions of loyalty so often configure in public discussions about Islam, Muslim leaders are compelled to continuously emphasise their patriotism. This article analyses recent mediated debates about Islam, in which the discursive boundary between 'radical, non-traditional' and 'moderate, traditional' Islam are being negotiated. The author argues that in the 2000s, the pressure to display loyalty has narrowed the scope of what is considered acceptable behaviour for Muslim leaders. Yet at the same time, these Muslim leaders cleverly adopt arguments and popular catchwords from the rhetoric of the political elite in order to emphasise the role of Islam in Russian society and tradition. In doing so, they seek to influence public discourse about Russian identity and defend the position of Muslims in the country.

KEYWORDS

Russia; Islam; patriotism; extremism; tradition; authoritarianization; the governance of minority religions; religious freedom

Introduction

In February 2015, a small Islamic organisation called the United Islamic Congress of Russia and its head, Shavkat Avyasov, made an appeal to President Putin and Mayor Sergey Sobyanin of Moscow:

> We, the patriotically oriented segment of Muslims of Russia, have addressed the leadership of the country with a request for permission to build in Moscow a mosque named after Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, so that his name would be preserved among the nations of our multinational Fatherland for centuries. (Mechet Imeni 2015)[1]

Avyasov explained that 'Muslims consider Vladimir Putin to be an epochal personality, who was sent by the Almighty to lead our Fatherland into an era of a Golden Dawn, to save the world from Western immorality and the fascist plague' (Mechet Imeni 2015).

The servility of the appeal was widely condemned and ridiculed in Russian Islamic social media. As tragicomic as the attempt and the wording of the appeal may seem, it

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[1]All quotations have been translated from Russian by the author.

can also be read as an innovative approach to a situation where Muslim communities throughout Russia face difficulties in receiving permission to build new mosques. There are currently only four mosques for the nearly one million Muslims in Moscow. The Dagestani journalist and blogger Umar Butaev (2015) notes: 'In my view, Shavkat-khadzhi [an honorary title for a person who has conducted *hajji* to Mecca] made this – to say it openly – vile request simply because he felt that no other form of leverage remained at his disposal.' Although the authorities did not respond positively to the appeal, at least it has not hindered the career development of its initiators. In November 2016, an imam who had supported the proposal of naming a mosque after Putin in a YouTube video was named the leading imam of the Yardyam Mosque in Moscow (Iman 2016).

The case of the 'Putin mosque' reflects the growing presence of patriotic and loyalist rhetoric in the speeches of Russian muftis, imams and heads of Islamic organisations. This trend is the result of common suspicions directed at the Muslim minority and manifested in accusations of disloyalty to the state. Increased policing, tightened regulations and suspicions of disloyalty are all features characterising the governance of Islam in post-9/11 Europe and North America (Edmunds 2012; Sunier 2014). However, in Russia the tightened control of Islam also follows the general political authoritarianisation and decline of religious freedom throughout the country (Fagan 2013). Therefore, in the Russian governance of Islam, political authoritarianisation and the global securitisation of Islam are intersecting developments.

The main question of this article is as follows: How does the need to articulate loyalty and patriotism shape the rhetoric of Islamic actors? The analysis examines both how the borders of acceptable rhetoric are negotiated and policed as well as how Islamic actors adapt to, challenge and use it to their benefit in specific situations. The main argument of this article is that the need to emphasise their loyalty and patriotism narrows the scope of what Islamic leaders can legitimately say in public. However, patriotism also serves as a strategic tool that Muslims use to protect their interests in Russian society.

The intensified control of Muslims in Russia as part of a global securitisation of Islam

In recent decades, and especially after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, alarmist discussions about the threat of radical and militant Islam have intensified around the world, with Russia being no exception (Verkhovsky 2010, 30). This trend has given new weight to already existing voices that demand stricter control of Muslim minorities. A crucial element in the governance of Islam in the post-9/11 world is identifying specific features of Islam and Muslim actors that need special surveillance and control. Both media representations of Islam and the administrative rhetoric in, for example, policy papers on religious politics or how to prevent radicalisation tend to juxtapose 'good' and 'bad' Islam. Analyses of this kind of dichotomy have noted similarities throughout the Western hemisphere, with militancy and illiberalism as well as a lack of loyalty constituting the main dominators of an undesirable form of Islam (Haddad and Golson 2007; Loobuyck, Debeer, and Meier 2013). However, the definitions of 'good' and 'bad' Islam, as well as the extent to which countries should control or govern Islam, are sites of constant negotiation and struggle connected to different political ideologies.

Despite many similarities, discussions about Muslims in Russia differ somewhat from those taking place in Western Europe. One of the main differences is that Russian discussions do not connect Islam with migrants as often as in the West because the Russian Empire had long included several large Muslim minorities, including Tatars, Bashkirs, Chechens, Circassians and Azeris. In parts of the Middle Volga and Northern Caucasus regions, Muslims form the majority of the population. Islam is regarded as one of the 'traditional' religions of Russia and an integral part of the country's history. Representatives of the Muslim community are routinely invited to state events and participate in the work of many high-level commissions and institutions. Therefore, it is common to hear both ordinary Russians and Russian scholars argue that Islam is regarded more positively in Russia than in Western Europe. The Russian scholars of nationalism Malakhov and Letnyakov (2018, 253–255) point out that mainstream 'systematic' parties and politicians cannot deviate from the general political consensus, for example by portraying Islam as a religion in overtly negative terms, because that would mean challenging the dominant narrative about Russia as a country with a long history of religions harmoniously coexisting with each other.

This is undoubtedly true, as idea of Russia as a model case for the harmonious coexistence of Islam and Christianity is central both in the rhetoric of the political establishment and Russians' conceptualisations of their national identity. However, as Malakhov and Letnyakov (2018, 254) note, Russian discussions are also characterised by normative divisions. The main division is between an accepted 'traditional', national Islam and a harmful, 'non-traditional' Islam – or between Islam and an ideological 'misuse' of Islam that falls outside the category of religion. This kind of rhetorical manoeuvring can be implemented to counter charges of Islamophobia and simultaneously to disguise Islamophobic policies, such as banning Islamic literature and organisations on very questionable grounds.

The majority of media sites in Russia are either directly or indirectly controlled by the state. The mainstream media often juxtaposes the Russian tradition of a peaceful coexistence of religions with exaggerated portrayals of the disrespect for Islam in Western Europe (Aitamurto 2016). Dudoignon (2015, 552) notes that when Islamophobia is addressed in Russia, the media usually focuses on it as a phenomenon occurring more in a Western context. At the same time, a 2013 survey found that more than 60% of Russians feel Islam poses a threat to national security and Russian culture (Kolstø 2016, 40–41; see also Rogozina 2018). Denying the existence of Islamophobia means that it cannot be countered, effectively silencing any discussion about the topic.

Islamophobia has an effect on political rhetoric and decision-making as well. For example, Tolz and Harding (2015) argue that after the massive nationalist riots in 2012, the main state-aligned TV channels launched a media campaign against migrants and Islam in Russia. The coverage of migrants and Muslims as a source of social problems and a possible threat rapidly increased and the portrayal of these groups consequently became more negative. Tolz and Harding suggest that this campaign reflected the Kremlin's search for a common enemy as the means to construct a clearer ideological message based on nationalism. Appealing to the supporters of ethno-nationalism was seen as a solution to declining levels of support among the population (Tolz and Harding 2015).

Several think tanks close to the political elite or the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), such as the Russian Institute for Strategic Research, have issued alarmist statements about the spread of radical Islam. In such statements, all non-compliance is frequently regarded as radicalism. However, the efforts to limit the freedoms and rights of Islamic organisations and actors are not only explained by pressures born out of nationalist and Islamophobic tendencies in Russian society. They are also part of the restrictions on religious activity that have intensified since the end of the 1990s, which reflect both the strengthening position of the ROC and political authoritarianisation in general.

The authoritarianisation of Russian society and the governance of Islam

Since the beginning of his first presidency in 2000, one of the most consistent features in the politics of Vladimir Putin has been the centralisation of power and gradual increase in repressive policies against anyone who criticises him. In fact, it was his promise to restore order that made Putin popular after the turbulent years of the 1990s, which had made many Russians sceptical of liberalism as it was perceived in Russia. Adopting a process of authoritarianisation, Russia has moved closer to authoritarian regimes characterised by restraints on political activity and interest representation, leading to weak political mobilisation, control of associational life, the legitimacy of emotion rather than ideology, and relatively unrestrained leadership (Levitsky and Way 2010; Gilbert and Mohseni 2011). Vladimir Gel'man notes that

> [i]n the 2000s, the authorities resorted to co-opting and isolating public actors who disagreed with government policy. Now those methods have been replaced with a "politics of fear," the demonstrative intimidation of those who advocate against the regime, the systematic public discrediting of the Kremlin's opponents, and the selective prosecution of opposition activists and their allies. (Gel'man 2015, 7)

Similar methods targeting undesired actors and court cases, which may occasionally seem almost random, have been used as obstacles to the proper functioning of religion. However, the political elite also selectively uses religion to bolster its legitimacy, and in return, provides privileges for certain churches or religions. Even minority religions may prosper if they are considered useful and not a threat to the power structures. Karrie J. Koesel (2014), who examined Russia and China as case studies of authoritarian regimes, argues that the relationship between the authorities and religious organisations in these countries often follows interest-based interactions in which both make use of their resources and gain benefits.[2] Nevertheless, such opportunities are usually not open for all religious groups. Moreover, the power imbalances in such cooperation efforts require more concessions from religious organisations than from the state.

The Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations, introduced in Russia in 1997, guarantees the right of conscience but has also set new prerequisites for the registration of religious organisations, such as the requirement that a religious group must have maintained a continuous presence in Russian territory for at least fifteen years. For Muslim communities, and for religious freedom in general, a more crucial turning

[2]For example, the state guarantees that a religious organisation can function by, for example, providing it with the opportunity to maintain premises for its operations. Religious organisations can fulfil different tasks ranging from providing a patriotic education to providing certain social services.

point was the introduction of a law generally referred to as an 'anti-extremism law' in 2002.[3] Extremist activity is defined, for example, as 'propaganda on the exclusiveness, superiority or deficiency of individuals on the basis of their attitude to religion, social, racial, national, religious or linguistic identity'. Needless to say, statements regarding the superiority of one's own faith can easily be found in many religious publications. Thus, the authorities now have weapons to ban a wide range of religious activities and publications for being extremist, which they have done on several occasions (Fagan 2013, 158–162). Many such verdicts have been criticised by human rights organisations and even by such institutions as the European Court of Human Rights (2018).

Local authorities can exercise considerable power with respect to court decisions banning certain publications or organisations as extremist. Publications that are declared extremist in any local court are automatically added to the federal list of banned literature. The situation has led to such controversial implementation of the law as the banning of a Russian translation of the Koran,[4] although this decision met with widespread disapproval and was later overturned. In 2015, President Putin signed into effect a law that prevents the banning of established holy scriptures – with the Bible, Koran, Jewish Tanakh and Tibetan Buddhist Kangyur specifically being mentioned – as extremist. Thus, low-level authorities may go further than the political elite in their efforts, which further complicates religious understandings of the difference between 'allowed' and 'prohibited' publications.

Authorities have banned publications and blocked news portals under the pretence of extremism, seized media outlets by various means (Freedom House 2018) and refused to register certain political parties on the dubious grounds that they violated formalities. Yet, these kinds of measures must be exercised carefully so as not to provoke widespread resistance. Instead, a more effective method is to marginalise oppositional parties and media by having some co-opted actors create 'oppositional parties' that are actually loyal to the Kremlin and by dominating TV space with entertaining, well-funded channels that take direction from the political elite (Petrov, Lipman, and Hale 2014).

In a similar vein, control of Islamic activity in Russia is orchestrated both by banning undesirable organisations and by supporting, or even creating, organisations that are unquestionably loyal to the authorities but do not necessarily enjoy much support among Russian Muslims. For example, in 2010, soon after the head of the Central Spiritual Board of Muslims of Russia (CPBMR), Talgat Tadjuddin, had proposed the unification of the largest umbrella organisations, the muftiates, a new organisation called the Russian Association of Islamic Association of Islamic Accord (RAIAIA) was founded. The founders of the organisation included representatives from the spiritual boards of the Stavropol, Perm, Mordovia, Ural and Ryazansk oblasts, though the Ryazansk muftiate soon announced that it would not be involved in the new organisation. The organisation never gained much support. Immediately after its establishment, an eminent scholar of Islam in Russia, Alexey Malashenko, characterised its impact of the organisation on Russian Muslims as 'practically zero' (2010), as it did not enjoy much support among ordinary Muslims (see also Bekkin 2020). Malashenko explained the

[3]'On Combating Extremist Activity', *'O protivodeistvii ekstremistskoi deyatel'nosti'*, No. 114 FZ.
[4]The translation of the Koran by Elmir Kuliev, a well-known scholar and Orientalist, was banned by a court in the provincial city of Novorossiysk.

initiative in the context of the authorities' attempts to control Islam, especially by weakening one of the most influential Islamic organisations in Russia, the Council of Muftis of Russia (CMR), which would have gained more influence through the unification of the muftiates. According to Malashenko, while the authorities had earlier preferred the idea of having a single Islamic organisation as an interlocutor, some had since begun to see divisions within the Islamic community as beneficial for governance. Russian Muslims widely denounced RAIAIA as a 'puppet' organisation (Malashenko 2010), and similar accusations have been targeted at another group, the Islamic community's Assembly of Muslims of Russia, which was established in 2014.

However, it would be misleading to draw too sharp of a line between the 'co-opted' and 'independent' Islamic organisations and actors. Virtually all Islamic organisations have had to make compromises when, for example, addressing such problems as discrimination against Muslims or misuse of the anti-extremism law. It is also important to note that Islamic actors are not just acting based on their own convictions, but on the orders of certain authorities, even when they, for example, vilify other Muslims and Islamic organisations or refuse to defend individuals and organisations that are charged with extremism. As James C. Scott (1985) has pointed out, for social groups that do not possess realistic opportunities to subvert hegemonic systems, the lack of open resistance and confrontation does not necessarily mean that they comply with those systems. Using the notion of 'everyday resistance', he demonstrates how the oppressed can use a wide array of subtle methods to counter oppression with a disguised resistance. The established norms and codes of behaviour, the 'public transcript', can be challenged through 'hidden transcripts' that take the form of, for example, metaphors, euphemisms and linguistic tricks to create identity and dignity for the community. Thus, 'calculated conformity' and 'routine compliance' may be seen not only as a necessity, but also as strategic means to cover other forms of subversive action (Scott 1985, 241, 278).

The self-governance of Islamic actors

Defending organisations or texts that are either accused of extremism or banned can easily attract charges of sympathising with radical views. Criticising verdicts on extremism or terrorism may even lead to legal persecutions. For example, in 2006 the renowned human rights organisation Memorial published on its website an analysis of the banning of four Hizb ut-Tahrir publications by mufti Nafigulla Ashirov. The author did not express support for Hizb ut-Tahrir and the text did not contain any direct quotations from the banned publications. Nevertheless, Memorial received a warning for extremist activity even though '[w]hat the Moscow Prosecutor's Office found extremist was a mere expression of disagreement with the Supreme Court' (Verkhovsky 2008). Reposting any material banned as extremist, even when the context lacks any evidence of endorsement, may bring legal charges. Statements and publications that authorities feel justify terrorism are punished with imprisonment for up to seven years.

One of the cornerstones of such a 'politics of fear' is that even high-level Islamic leaders cannot assume to be safe and even small transgressions may have serious consequences, as the following example demonstrates. In 2016, the former head imam of the Yardyam Mosque in Moscow, Makhmud Velitov, was accused of providing a public

justification of terrorism (Article 205.2). The prosecution based its case on a sermon he had delivered three years earlier, in which, as part of the commemoration of deceased Muslims, he described a recently killed Dagestanian activist, Abdulla Gappaev, as a good Muslim. However, after the death of Gappaev the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Dagestan declared that he had been a member of Hizb ut-Tahrir, which is forbidden in Russia (Vatchagaev 2016). In 2017, Velitov was sentenced to three years in prison for supporting terrorism. He was released from prison in 2019, though with some restrictions, including, for example, a prohibition on his travelling outside Moscow, where he is registered.

The extent to which Muslim public figures take risks when they make critical comments varies. It depends on what they have to lose personally and what kinds of responsibilities they have with their affiliations. People in top positions must take into account that they are not risking only their personal careers by making statements that are considered aggressive or unpatriotic but may also be jeopardising their organisations. The fear of legal consequences is one of the main reasons for the self-censorship of Islamic actors, but not the only one. Another factor has to do with the material and immaterial incentives provided by the state.

Nationwide, the state subsidises Islamic activities through the Fund for the Support of Islamic Culture, Science and Education. The most prominent muftis compete for places in such high-profile institutions as the Public Chamber and over invitations to state events. Such invitations, which indicate the Kremlin's favour toward a given muftiate, translate as a willingness to listen to its viewpoints. Maintaining good relationships with the authorities is no less important on the local level. Such relations guarantee protection from arbitrary legal proceedings and may help prominent Muslims or Muslim organisations secure material benefits, such as land for religious buildings, support for the restoration of a historical building or funding through joint projects. The support of authorities is also crucial in internal rivalries, such as disputes over the ownership of mosques. In post-Soviet Russia, where unlawful seizures of mosques by competing Muslim groups have not been uncommon, it is possible that occupiers receive signals of approval from the authorities.

Inclusion in official networks helps ensure Muslim organisations that their voice will be heard and influences any political decision-making concerning them, but such cooperation with the authorities may also have drawbacks. The tendency of Russian authorities to prefer a certain Islamic organisation easily creates internal rivalries (Aitamurto and Gaidukov 2018). Several studies demonstrate that in many European countries, engaging in cooperation with the state or the authorities may damage the credibility of Muslim organisations in the eyes of the Muslim community. Community members may accuse such organisations of having been co-opted by the state to serve its own interests and of working to exclude other Muslim organisations (Martikainen 2007; Loobuyck, Debeer, and Meier 2013). In Russia as well, several studies argue that muftiates do not always enjoy much support or even respect among ordinary believers and that muftis are often considered to be more 'administrators' than religious leaders (Braginskaia 2012, 615; Benussi 2018; Bekkin 2020).

A common concern within Muslim communities both in Russia and the rest of Europe is that external pressures from the authorities, media and so forth have begun to influence organisations too much, inducing them to surrender control to outsiders

who wish to 'change' Islam (Kortmann and Rosenow-Williams 2013, 54). Given that both in Russia and in Europe, a 'good' Muslim citizen is often docile and apolitical, the internalisation of the hegemonic language by the privileged Islamic partners of the state not only creates divisions within Muslim communities, but also weakens their ability to act as political subjects (Topolski 2018). For example, by countering the narrowing definition of freedom of speech and especially mobilising others to do so, a person moves from the category of being a 'good' Muslim to being a 'bad' Muslim in the eyes of authorities, thereby laying the groundwork for additional hindrances to collective action.

Similar dilemmas have been discerned by Fredrika Prina (2015) in her study of ethnic diaspora communities in Russia. She acknowledges that cooperation with the authorities has the capacity to empower minority communities and enhance their organisational and political participation skills, but she also discusses the price of such collaboration. According to Prina, Russian discussions about ethnic minority activism are characterised by sharp divisions into black-and-white poles of 'tolerance' and 'extremism,' in which everything non-conventional is quickly interpreted as extremism. Cooperation with the state entails consenting to refrain from criticism. Moreover, agreeing to use the discourse of power, such as interpreting dissent as extremism or minority politics as cultural development and not as a struggle for political rights, reproduces its language and interpretive frameworks, thus serving the interests of the state more than those of the minority (Prina 2015).

However, it can be argued that adopting the hegemonic discourse does not preclude contestations over the hegemonic meanings and interpretations embedded within the discourse, as has been suggested by James Scott (1985) in his discussion of hidden scripts and meanings. Russian discussions of patriotism are a prime example of this practice. Since the beginning of the 2000s, the Russian state has invested heavily in policies that aim to promote patriotism, including a generous allocation of funds for patriotic education. Thus, 'patriotism' has become an attractive label for groups seeking funding for their activities as well as social recognition for providing a valuable contribution to society. While 'patriotism' is a value subscribed to by countless Russian projects, organisations, politicians and other public actors, it does not mean that all subscribe to a uniform interpretation of the term. The label is used instrumentally for various projects, which may have little in common with the meaning of 'patriotism' in state discourses, with a good example being various neo-Pagan patriotic organisations. The concept is also used in critiques of the dominant hegemonic discourse. As a consequence, 'patriotism does not necessarily lead to increased engagement in support of the authorities' (Daucé et al. 2015, 5).

The hegemonic discourse, even in the form of such exclusive, normative categories as the division into 'good' and 'bad' Islam, may create new opportunities for Muslim communities to strengthen their legitimacy, but it may also come at such a price as, for example, community members having doubts about the integrity of local representative organisations. In his study of the Gülen movement in the West, Lacey (2014) notes that the image of moderate Islam can be used in a strategic way to enhance its position and to gain support among non-Muslims. The content and emphases of the attributes attached to 'good Islam' vary in different countries and societies, however. 'Moderate' (*umerenyii*) is a central denominator of 'good Islam' in Russia in a similar way as it is in Europe or

North America. Yet, in contrast to those places such themes as gender equality or the rights of sexual and gender minorities hardly ever appear in Russian conceptualisations of 'good Islam'; rather, such values as loyalty, the indigenous nature of the faith, patriotism and commitment to 'traditional values' are promoted (Aitamurto 2015). In fact, values and statements that are considered illiberal in the West may be seen as socially acceptable in Russia. A good example can be found in one book on the history of Islam in post-Soviet Russia written by the former executive secretary of the Interreligious Council of Russia and a controversial Orthodox scholar, Roman Silant'yev (2007). He describes how the Central Spiritual Board of Muslims of Russia had begun to lose its support both within the Muslim community and among the political elite in 2005: 'The authority of the Supreme Mufti was significantly elevated by his statements against the gay parade in Moscow. Talgat Tadjuddin harshly condemned the organisers of the event, reminding them that the Prophet Muhammad had ordered that homosexuals be killed' (Silant'yev 2007, 187). What is revealing in this quote is the taken-for-granted assumption that the condemnation of homosexuality, even in such an aggressive manner, would be looked upon favourably by the political elite and society in general.

Policing the borders of the 'acceptable': examples of 'disloyalty' or 'aggressiveness'

Next, I will provide some examples of the negotiations over patriotism and lack of loyalty. The analysis focuses on the ways in which accusations of 'disloyalty' and 'aggressiveness' effectively narrow what is permissible for Islamic actors to say. As the analysis shows, numerous different actors, including other Muslims, are involved in such governance activities. Consequently, policing also takes in the form of self-governance, i.e., individuals begin to censor themselves consciously or unconsciously.

Dissident thinking as militant revolutionism

Regularly promoting oppositional political views causes problems for Islamic organisations and activists. Likewise, Islamic publications must assess the risks of publishing critical reports about the political elite or authorities. For example, in 2016 one of the most popular Islamic news portals in the country, *Golos Islama* (The Voice of Islam), was blocked by the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Communications (Roskomnadzor). The deputy prosecutor general named three grounds for blocking the site. The first two had to do with the 'comments by readers of an extremist nature, calling for violating the legislation of the Russian Federation' and the reposting of an interview with the leader of Al-Nusra Front, published originally in Al Jazeera. The third accusation addressed the general line of *Golos Islama*:

> [T]he publications are characterised by tendentious material, which [takes] a hostile attitude to certain social groups, in particular to the representatives of law enforcement, regulatory agencies and the leadership of the Russian Federation, as well as to the foreign and domestic policy of Russia. (Han 2016)

The law against extremism refers to the incitement of hatred against 'social groups'; in some legal cases, 'social groups' has been interpreted to include 'law enforcement, regulatory agencies and the leadership of the Russian Federation'. Effectively, this kind of reading of the law seemingly prevents all criticism of the political elite and authorities. Moreover, in March 2019 a new law came into effect that criminalised all expressions of 'disrespect' for Russian society, the government, official symbols, the constitution or any state body.

In addition to criticising the current political elite and authorities, envisioning different types of regimes or political systems can also result in legal measures. In a closed session in February 2003, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation banned fifteen Islamic organisations for being terrorist organisations, including Al-Qaeda, the Muslim Brotherhood and Hizb ut-Tharir. According to the Supreme Court decision, Hizb ut-Tahrir

> has as its aim the removal of non-Islamic governments and the establishment of Islamic government on a worldwide scale by means of reviving the "Worldwide Islamic Caliphate", initially in regions with a majority Muslim population, including in Russia and the countries of the CIS [the Commonwealth of Independent States].[5]

The verdict also accuses Hizb ut-Tahrir of spreading 'militant Islamic propaganda,' but provides little justification for this claim within the decision itself.

The verdict has been criticised by human rights organisations and activists on the basis that Hizb ut-Tahrir has consistently announced that it does not advocate militant revolution or terrorist activity. For example, the head of the human rights organisation SOVA, Alexander Verkhovsky, has noted that by the time of the verdict, Hizb ut-Tahrir had not committed any terrorist actions or made plans for such, and that the authorities' later discoveries of arms and plans for acts of violence by the members of the organisation are 'questionable' (Verkhovskii 2018). Verkhovskii does point out, though that several publications by Hizb ut-Tahrir contain anti-Semitic remarks, and therefore, the decision to ban it for being extremist and inciting interethnic hatred would be quite justifiable. However, the court's use of the term 'terrorist' and the text defending its decision clearly state that the reason for the ban is the organisation's aim to overthrow the current Russian democratic regime. Following this logic, organisations that advocate the restoration of monarchism in Russia should also be banned, which has not been suggested in public. The decision also confuses criminal actions with militant rhetoric, acts of violence with calls to change the regime model, which is also not uncommon in Western discussions about Islam (Modood 2005, 205).

Assertiveness as aggression

In the 1990s, Muslims actively sought to gain a more established position in the political life of Russia. New parties or movements like the Party of Islamic Revival, Nur, the Union of Muslims of Russia and Refakh took part in parliamentary elections, albeit with very modest results. In 2001, a new law banned the creation of political parties based on ethnicity or religion, thus compelling Islamic activists to channel their political activity into

[5]February 14, 2003, GKPI 03–116.

existing parties. However, already since the beginning of the millennium the majority of Islamic leaders, and the most prominent organisations in particular, have shown little interest in political initiative apart from expressing support for the ruling elite (Malashenko 2009, 248–250). In a similar vein, demands for greater recognition of Muslim minorities have diminished.

One of the few vociferous Islamic intellectuals who continued oppositional political activity in the 2000s was the chairman of the Islamic Committee of Russia, Geidar Dzhemal. His political philosophy consisted of a peculiar mix of leftist, rightist, ultra-conservative and Islamic elements as well as conspiracy theories. In his writings, Dzhemal envisioned a global revolution based on Islam. Dzemal remained a rather marginal figure in the Islamic establishment in Russia, both because of his oppositional stance and because, unlike the majority of Russian Muslims, he was a Shia Muslim. Nevertheless, he gained much nationwide visibility as a frequent guest commentator on various talk shows on the main TV channels, and his blogs and vlogs also had audiences among ordinary Muslims (Laruelle 2016). In 2005, Dzhemal and the Islamic Committee of Russia suggested that the Christian symbols on the emblem of Russia should be removed in recognition of the multi-ethnic and multi-confessional nature of the state. The idea was supported by, among others, Nafigulla Ashirov from the CMR and a well-known translator of the Koran, Valeriya Prokhorova.

However, the proposal also received some criticism and indeed ultimately proved somewhat unrealistic. Typically, criticism of the proposal was framed along the lines of two themes that are common also in other cases where Muslims have demanded more rights: the first is the claim that any contestation of the hegemony of the ROC bears the risk of creating interreligious conflicts, while the second is the argument that such suggestions must have been orchestrated from abroad and are thus targeted against the Russian state. These interpretative frameworks and underlying assumptions were also adopted by many Islamic leaders. For example, the head of the CMR in Russia, Ravil' Gainutdin, echoed these concerns when he stated that 'the muftiate feels that the attempts to bring changes to the established national symbols may lead to an unwanted rise in tensions in a multinational and multi-confessional society' (Muftii Gainutdin 2005). The press secretary for CMR, Radik Amirov, concluded that the statement reminded him of the call for 'Muslims to create another Chechnya' [war] in Russia (Pyatunina and Yakovleva 2005). Consequently, the strategy of seeking legitimacy by applying hegemonic frameworks to their demands may entail the cost of depriving them of much agency even within Islamic circles.

Criticism as unpatriotic activity

For Islamic actors, tackling Islamophobia is not easy because such statements routinely raise accusations of being unpatriotic. An example of this can be found in the public disputes resulting from a radio interview with Ravil' Gainutdin in 2010. In the interview, Gainutdin argued that the new RAIAIA muftiate had been created to complicate the planned unification of the main muftiates. He claimed that Aleksei Grishin, the chief advisor of the Administration of the President in the Council for Coordination with Religious Organizations, had played an active role in its creation, a figure who Gainutdin

described as being an 'Islamophobe'. Gainutdin also addressed the obstacles faced by Islamic organisations when building new mosques.

> In understanding that today Islam is a major factor in Russia (…) there are attempts to halt the growth of Islam. This manifests itself already in daily life, like in refusals to grant land for building mosques in big cities. For example, in Moscow, where more than two million Muslims live, great tension can be felt. Because of the lack of mosques, Muslims have to conduct their celebratory *namaz* [prayer] in the streets, on tramlines, even in churchyards. In this way, the humiliation of Muslims, the politics of violating their civil rights, continues. (Gainutdin, quoted in Karimova 2010)

Gainutdin is one of if not the most influential Islamic leaders in Russia. In comparison to many other muftis, such as e.g., Talgat Tdjuddin or Albir Krganov, he has been relatively active in addressing the problems that Muslims face in Russia, like the banning of Islamic literature. However, this sharp form of criticism – and especially the direct attack on the administrations of Moscow and the president – was somewhat unusual for him. When Russian Islamic leaders criticise the authorities, their accusations are usually still couched in loyalty to the political elite and their politics, such as blaming authorities for simply deviating from the official line of the President of the Russian Federation. No high-level authorities commented on his statement. Instead, rival Islamic leaders hastened to disapprove of Gainutdin's claims. The head of the Central Spiritual Board of Muslims of Russia, Talgat Tadjuddin, accused him of provocation:

> Of what kind of insults to Muslim can one speak when mosques are built in the country, the systems of education and madrassahs are opened, in all mosques the foundations of Islam are taught and, among the youth, spiritual work is conducted in order to counter the entrance to radical Islam, terrorism? There are no obstacles for law-abiding Islam in the country. (Bogatykh 2010)

The mufti of RAIAIA, Magomedali Khuzin, insinuated that Gainutdin's words could be interpreted as illegal extremism:

> When the person who calls himself a sheik and the representative of the Council of Muftis makes statements that inflame and pour oil or gasoline on fire, I think there should be made, firstly, a juridical assessment of these words and, secondly, a political assessment of the recent doings and sayings of this gentleman. (Bogatykh 2010)

Gainutdin's criticism was viewed as unpatriotic activity, and again some accusations were made that he had been acting on behalf of foreign powers. Ismail Berdiev from the Coordinating Center of Muslims of the North Caucasus stated that, 'Either the person has become crazy or he has received such a big grant from foreign sources that he took the risk of throwing such a serious accusation against the state' (Bogatykh 2010). Aleksei Grishin did not comment on this statement. However, a few months later, when Gainutdin again used the word 'Islamophobia' in his criticism of ultra-nationalist and xenophobic activity, Grishin blatantly dismissed all discussion of Islamophobia in Russia as an unpatriotic activity:

> This theme [Islamophobia] is very convenient to the enemies of Russia beyond the borders of the Russian Federation as well. […] It is completely inappropriate to charge the Russian state with Islamophobia […] In what other country has the number of mosques grown 70 times over the last 20 years!. (Goble 2011)

These cases demonstrate that in contemporary Russia, claims of Islamophobia are regularly countered by arguing both that they are false and *a priori* indications of an unpatriotic stance. Given that questions of disloyalty and loyalty become anticipated in all discussions about the Muslim minority, any relevant counterargument criticising policies and measures that discriminate against Muslims must be framed in the avowal of patriotism. The importance of patriotism is further stressed by the fact that there are few alternative values that would have similar weight.

During the last decade, the discourse on human rights has been undermined in several ways in Russia. In such international institutions as the United Nations, the ROC has actively promoted adjusting the universal concept of human rights to fit only 'traditional cultures', thus introducing different kinds of caveats (Stoeckl 2016). The watering down of the idea of human rights is connected to the authoritarianisation process in Russia. The concept of 'sovereign democracy', launched in 2006 by the first deputy chief of the Russian Presidential Administration, Vladislav Surkov, refers to the centralisation of power, but it also insinuates that if international norms are seen to violate the sovereignty of Russia, they will not be followed (Ziegler 2012, 412).

With respect to Muslims, the concept of human rights is reversed in two ways in public discussions. First, it is increasingly common to encounter in the media and in public discussions arguments suggesting that the principles of universal human rights cannot be applied to certain Islamic groups or Muslims because of their own intolerance or aggressiveness (on similar trends in Europe, see Cesari 2012, 431). The other line of argumentation maintains that the appeals to human rights are misused by radical Muslims in order to cover their actual motives, and therefore, such appeals are not sincere or genuine. For example, in 2011, in the wake of terrorist activities in Kazan, massive controlling measures were implemented against local Muslims, including countless raids and arrests. As a response, local Muslims and human rights activists organised demonstrations against the trampling of the rights of Muslims. The account of one such demonstration by a well-known scholar of Islam, Rais Suleimanov (2012), dismisses their claims. According to him, the event was organised by 'fundamentalists and separatists', who had simply 'decided to play the "defending human rights" card'. Such statements deny the inalienable and universal nature of human rights, thereby watering down the legitimacy of the appeals to this moral principle.

Discourses on loyalism and patriotism as a means of defending the rights of Muslims

For Russian Muslims, patriotic rhetoric is necessary for countering any suspicions of disloyalty and subversiveness, but it may also present new opportunities to defend their position and interests. Russian Muslims use the theme of patriotism in countless ways to make claims of loyalty and apply it for a myriad of goals. For example, the role of Islam in Russian history can be juxtaposed with 'non-traditional' religions when negotiating certain privileges. Funding for Islamic education or publishing can be sought by claiming that developing native, Russian forms of Islam functions as a shield against foreign influences.

The symbolic power that World War II has gained as a central trope in the nationalist narrative of Russia's heroic past (Malinova 2017) has made it an attractive rhetorical

strategy in different kinds of negotiation. For example, in December 2016 the Administration of the Leningrad Oblast's Committee of Youth Politics organised an emergency training at a local medical college. As a part of the training, the students were taken as hostages by a group dressed in cloths that, as the complaint cited below states, clearly referred to Muslim radicals. This event was condemned by the head of the Islamic organisation Mekka and Tatar activist, Rinat Valiev, who sent a letter about the incident to the governor of the Leningrad Oblast. The letter began:

> Together with others, Muslims survived the years of the fascist blockade and took part in the defense of Leningrad. Tens of thousands of Muslims, including Tatars, risked their necks on the battlefields and in the territory of the Leningrad region. Our grandfathers, fathers and ancestors defended our lands from the fascist plague that did not spare their lives.
>
> The city of Leningrad suffered all the hardships of heavy occupation, and thanks to the fraternity of our ancestors, the representatives of various confessions on the battlefields, [the sacrifice] has borne fruit. Our lands are cleared of filth, the complete annihilation of fascism […] It would seem that on the ground covered by the blood of our ancestors, there should be no more manifestations of fascism, interracial and interreligious war, [or] hatred of our neighbors. At least our ancestors dreamed of it. But […] they were wrong. (Muslim 2016)

Valiev refers to the common Soviet and Russian narrative of victory in World War II having been achieved together through the cooperation and sacrifices of ethnic and religious minorities. Consequently, these minorities can claim rights to land 'covered in the blood' of their 'ancestors'. Tatars and other Muslims, whose ancestors fought in the war, are presented as equally entitled to be included in the 'us' of Russian society. Due to the almost sacred nature of the 'Great Patriotic War' and its veterans in contemporary Russian society, this argument is difficult to counter in socially acceptable ways.

Islamic leaders adopt the general patriotic rhetoric and such topics as pride in national identity to call attention to the Russian tradition of peaceful coexistence of religions and ethnicities. At the same time, they hold the political elite accountable for aspiring to this ideal. In 2012, a school in Stavropol forbid Muslim girls from wearing the hijab on school grounds, giving rise to much societal discussion. The right to wear a hijab in public was artfully defended by Ravil' Gainutdin in a speech at the meeting of the Eurasian Islamic Council in Istanbul in 2012:[6]

> Unfortunately, today we hear statements according to which Russia has allegedly become enemy number one for Muslims. Every year we build and open tens of mosques, madrassahs, Muslim cultural centres and universities. In the post-Soviet era, Russian Muslims were the first ones to get the right to be photographed in hijabs for passports. And today, when Europe is moving towards limiting religious freedom, Russia is taking consistent steps in the protection of the rights and feelings of believers. (Gainutdin 2012)

Gainutdin provides useful PR arguments for the Russian government vis-à-vis Europe: while Europe is 'limiting religious freedom', Russia grants Muslim women the right to be photographed in hijabs. However, his juxtaposition of Russia and Europe can also be read as a demand that the Russian state assume responsibility for preserving this right.

[6]Despite Gainutdin's effort, the Russian state has adopted a more restrictive stance toward the wearing of hijabs in recent years. In 2012, President Putin argued that the hijab did not belong to 'traditional Islam in Russia', and in 2015 the Supreme Court granted schools the right to ban hijabs.

Conclusions

Islam holds a recognised position in Russian society. The state provides financial support to Islamic organisations for publishing literature and organising religious activities. It would be difficult to imagine top politicians disagreeing with the fact that Islam is an integral part of Russian history and tradition. Yet at the same time, the rights of Russian Muslims are also under serious attack due to the growing popularity of Islamophobia and the process of political authoritarianisation in Russia, which affect both civil society and minority religions.

The authoritarianisation process in Russia manifests itself in the extensive legal instruments being employed and an increasing readiness to use them to repress Islamic organisations, individuals and activity. However, Russian authorities also resort to softer measures, such as favouring weak substitutions for interest representation and persuading Islamic organisations to refrain from criticism by providing them with different kinds of incentives. Charges of and verdicts on extremist or terrorist activity can be passed rather easily, but perhaps an even more effective method is intimidation by means of arbitrary legal measures that silence contestation. Nevertheless, the tightened control is not only executed by the state. The boundaries between what is 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' are also reproduced and negotiated in the media and via expert discussions.

The narrowing of the scope of what is considered admissible for Islamic leaders to say can be seen as part of the authoritarianisation of Russian society and politics. Yet, somewhat similar trends of the intensified policing of Islamic religiosity, divisions into 'good' and 'bad' Islam (or sanctioned and unsanctioned Islamic activity), suspicions of disloyalty and interpretations of non-compliance as radicalism have also been noted in the post-9/11 governance of Islam in Europe and North America. Thus, the tightening control of Muslims in Russia reflects not only the political authoritarianisation of the country, but the global securitisation of Islam as well.

Self-governance and peer governance gain additional weight through the securitisation of Islam and political authoritarianisation. It is not uncommon for Islamic leaders to vilify their competitors in order to gain influence and please certain authorities. The above-mentioned charges by rival muftis against Gainutdin for making claims of Islamophobia are a good example of this phenomenon, as is the lack of support given to Velitov by other Islamic leaders after he was arrested. The fear of becoming associated with extremism, which in the worst cases may even induce charges of extremist activity, encourages such condemnation.

The analysis presented in this article has identified certain mechanisms for the tightening of censorship in the rhetoric of Islamic leaders. In terms of the public reception of statements made by Muslims, any criticism of the state is easily condemned as unpatriotic activity or hate speech against the majority, demands for constitutional rights as disloyalty to Russia, assertiveness as aggressiveness and subscription to alternative social ideologies as militant revolutionism. Each of these mechanisms is usually presented in discussions as part of the larger question of loyalty, with patriotism being the ultimate value in such arguments. In fact, expressions of patriotism and loyalty serve as an implicit prerequisite for religious organisations seeking a voice on the public stage in contemporary Russia.

In the patriotic rhetoric of Islamic leaders, Russian history, contemporary Russian society and the political elite are often celebrated in a way that seemingly ignores the existence of such problems as discrimination against Muslims or violations of religious freedom. However, patriotism also serves as a value that Muslims use to anchor their demands and arguments, and in this way, it also opens new avenues for them to defend their position and influence public discussions. Hence, patriotism functions as a public transcript within which a hidden transcript is employed to raise the consciousness of the community and to challenge dominant paradigms.

Reminders of the PR value of the Muslim minority and religious tolerance serve as a way to counter discrimination against Muslims. Emphasis on the historical role of Muslims in Russian culture leads to the conclusion that mosques are a traditional part of Russian urban spaces. With this patriotic rhetoric, Muslims also influence negotiations on the cultural and political identity of Russia. For example, Russian Muslims usually support the idea of Russia as a unique culture that incorporates both Eastern and Western traditions. This rhetoric lends support to Russia's foreign policy aim of challenging Western dominance through the idea of a multi-polar world. Descriptions of the contributions of non-Slavic people, such as Tatars, to the history of Russia, including the wars it has waged, are set against the nationalist ideology of 'Russia for [ethnic] Russians' (*Rossiya dlya russkikh*).

The analysis has demonstrated various ways in which negotiation and contestation can take place amidst tightening controls. This process creates some new opportunities for Russian Muslims. However, these opportunities do not substitute for the damage done by repressing Islamic activities. It also seems reasonable to suggest that even for those Islamic organisations that are able to benefit from the opportunities of cooperating with the state, the adoption of dominant values and frameworks may carry the risk of alienating ordinary believers and losing their support.

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